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Opening the debate

The End of European Modernity?

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Diagnoses of our time

If the West declines, how would we know?

There seems to be quite some agreement about how the West rose. From around 1800 onwards, economic historians tell us, economic production increased much more rapidly in Western Europe than in other parts of the world, including areas of China and India that had been similarly rich and productive until then. The "Great Divergence" (Kenneth Pomeranz) between the West, gradually including North America as well, and the rest became ever more pronounced during the 19th and much of the 20th centuries. It started to diminish again only late in the 20th century, first with the rise of Japan, later other East Asian economies, and now China and possibly other countries. Today we can largely take it for granted that the period in which the West was immensely more rich than all other parts of the world is over. This is a major problem for economic policy-making, and it may have considerable repercussions for democracy – indeed it already has. But should we really see it in as dramatic terms as the expression "decline of the West" usually suggests? If the outcome of this economic transformation were a planet marked by lesser material inequality – unfortunately this is far from the case – we should rather welcome this. If the outcome were a less resource-extractive and polluting way of life, even better – but also even much more unlikely. There has never been a good justification for the divergence of the West in terms of material wealth. If it now (relatively) declines in those terms, we need to find ways to cope, but we should not deplore the rise of the East, or possibly the South.

So, let's try another angle. The recent British television series *Downton Abbey* shows vividly and with great nuance the end of a world. One observes how the relations between the aristocratic family owning the estate and their numerous servants are transformed between 1912 and 1926 through war, democracy, the rise of socialist and feminist thinking, legal equality and economic changes. The New Year's partieshat close the series are harmonious, but everyone in the scenes is aware that this world of hierarchy, privilege and subservience is approaching its end. And every spectator knows the outcome, too, since

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post-Second World War and much more so current English society show only minuscule traces of that past. Almost every spectator also welcomes the changes that are shown – who is explicitly against equal freedom and abolition of privilege? Significantly, though, one cannot help sympathizing with some of the conservative sentiments that are expressed, with the fear of the waning of a world of warm, personal relations marked by dedication to the other in favour of a colder, more formal and more efficiency-oriented life. But we would not call this the decline of the West either.

Thus, we need to go on searching for other understandings. Often the period between the middle of the 18th and the middle of the 20th centuries is seen as the epoch of high or classic modernity. This periodization roughly coincides with the one of the economic rise of the West. It also marks the era that leads from the revolutions through the long and often overlooked "persistence of the Old Regime" (Arno Mayer) to the advent of formal equal freedom, which inaugurates the era in which we now live. But quite different emphases of interpretation can be hidden behind the term "modernity". And, for the purposes of our reflections here, we need to ask what happens when high modernity is over, whether this is when the decline truly starts.

Cornelius Castoriadis's particular way of looking at the period from 1750 to 1950 is useful. He sees in European societies of the 18th century the second great awakening of the commitment to autonomy, to the principle that human beings give themselves their own laws of living together, after its first appearance in ancient Greece. From then on the commitment to personal and collective autonomy, to freedom and democracy is alive in European history. Castoriadis praises the artists and inventors of this period, but then says that this spirit of autonomy withers away again over the following two centuries to give way to "generalized conformism" in the late 20th century.

This is another possible diagnosis of the decline of the West, and it comes closer to how we may want to grasp it. It is useful to start out from self-understandings of society. If there is rise and decline, there usually is also some consciousness of rise and decline, and be it a partial one. Furthermore, it is fruitful to start out from some notion of modernity as autonomy. When human beings see themselves as able and willing to give themselves their own laws, such moment is rightly considered as a high point in history. This commitment is more telling for the rise of the West than increasing material affluence (though the relation between the two is well worth exploring in more detail). So what does it mean if this commitment rises and then withers away? We need to look at transformations of European modernity to develop a sense of rise and decline.

Individual freedom and purposeful action

There has been something like a European core concept of modernity, in the centre of which stood individual freedom and rational action. But this was not the crown of a series of great achievements, as Europeans tend to portray their history. It was developed in response to crises, namely to the cultural-intellectual and political challenges arising from the encounter with other, unknown people in America and the breakdown of the unity of Christian cosmology in the wake of the Reformation. The last

resort in such crisis situation was the individual: as the subject of certain knowledge, as the source of interests and desires; as the holder of inalienable rights; as the atom with which viable polities could be constructed. All other socio-political phenomena were relegated to secondary status in such individualist ontology: The social contract was supposed to be drafted and signed by reasonable individuals. Popular sovereignty became increasingly to be seen as the aggregate of individual preferences. The thus constituted polity needed to be distinct from the comprehensive world-views that tied human beings to each other, importantly through religious beliefs.

Given the explicitness and radicality of the ways in which the human condition was being rethought in Enlightenment philosophy, the view became widespread that this marked the onset of European modernity – and, by implication, of modernity *tout court*. But today we can recognize that this core concept of modernity was nothing but a very particular interpretation of modernity. Even though it was put forward very forcefully in Europe during the 18th century, the individualist-instrumentalist model of the human being and of society and polity never went uncontested. Alternative proposals were made in response. When European thought underlined the richness and density of social bonds among human beings, it did so in rejection of individualism and instrumentalism. When the emphasis was placed on meaning-providing communities into which human beings are always embedded, then this was meant to oppose the idea that human collectivities only come into existence through a contract between rational individuals. That is why it is always somewhat inadequate, even though not entirely wrong, to denounce European individualism-cum-instrumentalism from a critical, postcolonial or decolonial perspective. These responses brought about a great variety of intra-European self-understandings, which reflected different, and often quite distinct, regional historical experiences. Europe has never been monolithic, and neither has European modernity.

Furthermore, one needs to underline that the core model of modernity was never applied in European history. This is so, partly, because it was rejected by elites aiming to preserve their privileges in the face of the revolutionary agenda entailed by the model, and partly because of the incoherence and inadequacy of the model itself. Europeans have never in large numbers been convinced of an individualist ontology – much less, for instance, than the settler descendents in the US. None of its key components – democracy, markets, individual autonomy, separation of religion and politics – was implemented in the way in which the promotors of the model had conceptualized and expected it.

Re-interpretations of European modernity

Once this is recognized, then the question of European modernity is no longer the one about the invention and realization of a model but one of rethinking self-understandings and world-interpretations in the face of the challenges of different historical moments. The core model was created in the face of unknown alterity and cosmological divide during the period that Europeans call “early modernity”. Later transformations are distinct from earlier ones not least by the fact that they take place at a moment

when the core model already exists and shapes the discursive space within which re-interpretation occurs. Major events in the European nineteenth century, which Karl Polanyi analyzed as a "Great Transformation", were marked by the imaginary of market self-regulation and the imaginary of inclusive-egalitarian democracy. In both cases, the individual human being assumes a pivotal role and comprehensive world-views are relegated to a secondary role. But both of this is the case much more in thought than in practice. Recognizing the fallacies of instrumentalist individualism as well as, often enough, experiencing negative consequences of its partial applications, Europeans tried to elaborate smooth compromises between different commitments, such as the "solidarisme" of the Third French Republic, or the inter-class alliances in Scandinavia between the World Wars. But such arrangements worked under rather favourable circumstances only, and they lacked the conceptual coherence of the core model. Under more conflictive circumstances, Europeans embarked on radical re-interpretations, such as the suprematist racial oppression and exploitation of colonialism and the "collective essentialisms" of fascism, Nazism and Stalinism.

A high point of European modernity?

Based on the experience with the earlier trials, both the positive ones and the disastrous ones, it seemed that a stable institutional compromise could be reached after the end of Nazism and the Second World War. This was the liberal-democratic Keynesian welfare and nation-state set in a context of increasing European integration. This organized European modernity was seen – and to some extent experienced – as the optimum combination of individual liberty, competitive-party democracy, social solidarity, and national belonging and community.

When internal and external shocks to this "model" emerged from the late 1960s and through the 1970s, the general assumption was that adaptation was possible without major problems, in particular in the forms of greater individual liberty (later captured as "individualization") and greater openness to the outside (later captured as "globalization"). It was little recognized that these changes, as justifiable as they may partly be in normative terms, undermined the bases of the socio-political arrangement. They undermined democracy by de-specifying the collectivity that self-determines its rules (no longer the nation, but neither Europe nor the globe) and weakening the bonds between the members of a polity. And they undermined social solidarity by withdrawing resources from the polity through fiscal and legal competition.

There was a moment when Europe seemed to be ready to spell out, in the proper name of Europe, the core principles of its particular interpretation of modernity. The EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, proclaimed in the year 2000 and acquiring legal force with the Lisbon Treaty of 2009, may be read as such a document. This Charter commits the European Union and its member states to individual rights, democracy, solidarity, justice. Beyond binding itself, Europe aims at portraying itself globally as the leading defender of these principles. But these insights arrived like Minerva flying at dusk. As we witness every day, Europe easily recedes from these commitments in the face of problems such as the post-2008 recession with rising unemployment and public

deficits and the recent refugee crisis. Importantly, it becomes increasingly clear that Europe lacks criteria for applying these principles. Europe is abstractly committed to democracy but has developed little sense of requirements for democratic deliberation and decision-making. On the inside, there is no self-understanding of the EU as a polity with boundaries enabling collective self-determination. Towards the outside, the rhetoric welcome for apparent "democratization" through movements such as in North Africa, the Middle East or Eastern Europe replaces reflection about conditions for viable democracy. Until the double strike of 2016 with the British referendum and the US elections, similarly, Europe led trade-policy negotiations, such as over the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) with the USA, as if it had remained blindly committed to the idea of the enhancement of peace and the increase of the wealth of nations by expanding commerce without any consideration for negative social and environmental consequences.

Misconceived freedom

Dismantling this European organized modernity may have been unavoidable for a number of reasons. But the dismantling happened without any guidance for re-instituting European modernity in a more adequate way. The destruction of the institutions of organized modernity largely happened in the name of freedom, be it the freedom for personal self-realization hailed by "1968" or be it the freedom of the entrepreneur. But, as Michel Foucault recognized, "the affirmation or the empty dream of freedom" leads into misconceived "projects that claim to be global or radical", without being so.

Europe has fallen into the trap of hegemonic discourse.The new horizons of individualization and globalization, in sociological terms, or of human rights and democracy, in political terms, have caught Europe unprepared. They do not provide for a place for Europe, which needs to be specific, circumscribed in social space and rooted in historical time, without being narrow-minded with regard to others or determined by its past. And, thus, two historical shortcomings have become clear today: in cultural-intellectual terms, first, Europeans have never determined their relation to the individualist ontology promoted in the Enlightenment: is it the foundation for the normative claims on which a new and better society can be built, or is it an erroneous exaggeration of concerns arising in a situation of strife and radical doubt? This cultural-intellectual ambiguity, secondly, became dangerous in political terms: the calls for freedom and self-determination derived from Enlightenment ontology could be adopted by elites for their purposes arguing against existing constraints, as freedom of commerce, as freedom to buy labour-power, as freedom to transform the earth. And even though this ontology also served the dominated groups – women, workers, the colonized – to make their claims for liberation and recognition, in their resistance to elites their political proposals could turn anti-liberal, as they do today again.

Thus, there is a strong tension between abstract normative commitments and the requirements of the current situation, but this tension is barely recognized. We can make it more visible by briefly addressing two questions that are central for any re-interpretation of modernity for our time – of European modernity in particular, but

for modernity in other parts of the globe as well. These are the questions of historical injustice and of the need to give form to processes of collective self-determination.

Putting the past to rest

Across the nineteenth century, the notion that Europe had developed universal commitments that would be applied across the globe became widespread, not least as a consequence of actual European global domination. During the first half of the twentieth century, this notion was strongly shaken and widely abandoned. After Nazism and the Second World War, a self-critical view on one's own collective memory was developed, to some extent pioneered, in many European societies, in contrast to earlier notions of national pride. Some European polities re-constituted themselves in the face of historical injustices experienced and committed in the past. By the 1970s and 1980s, however, this focus on self-criticism gave increasingly way to the notion that the problematic past had been overcome and could now be settled. The apparent success of European integration created the basis for a new kind of collective pride. The "transitions" from authoritarian rule in Southern Europe and later the exit from Soviet-style socialism and the reconstitution of polities in former Yugoslavia were guided by the idea that the past needed to be quickly overcome and settled to open the path for a better future. Similarly, the European sense of responsibility for the former colonies, still dominant in a paternalistic way during the 1970s, gave way to a view of co-operation on equal terms with everyone responsible for oneself. In other words, the idea that socio-political organization and co-operation in the present should be based on formal equality and on a "veil of ignorance" cast over past experience became more widespread. Europeans see themselves as committed to values of freedom and equality, but they behave as if everyone on the globe could act as equally free without being conditioned in the present by the consequences of past injustice.

Democracy but little to decide

After the Second World War, Europe had developed a commitment to democracy that was both firm and contained. The nation was the unquestioned site of popular sovereignty, and at the same time European integration and post-colonial co-operation were emerging forms of inter-polity coordination. Within the polity, the egalitarian-inclusive commitment to free and universal suffrage was no longer in doubt, even though political mobilization outside institutional channels was discouraged and radical political views outlawed or marginalized. On these assumptions, democracy seemed stable. From the late 1960s onwards, however, the scenario became much more unstable. Internationally, the terms of trade turned more unfavourable towards the "advanced industrial economies", and at the same time increasing international trade permitted less Keynesian-style control of the national economy. Furthermore, more radical political alternatives emerged in Latin America and in decolonization struggles in the name of democracy. Domestically, "unconventional political participation" increased and raised concerns about a "crisis of governability". By the end of the 20th century, these tensions had found a "solution" that satisfied the elites for a while:

intensified democratic participation was accepted while at the same time collective self-determination was emptied of substance because of global interconnectedness and interdependencies. Here, again, an abstract normative commitment is applied without regard for the specific circumstances. Thus, such "solution" cannot be stable: because of increasing dissatisfaction, governments are regularly voted out of office; but since incoming governments continue to pursue the same policies both citizen disaffection and non-democratic leanings increase. European politics is facing an explosive situation, with ever more cases of extreme political instability and, at the same time, an inability to create new avenues of collective action through deliberation in the public sphere.

Generalized complacency

Over the past half century, the impression was grew – or returned – that Europe and Europeans are on the winning side of history: other societies were inclined to copy the "European model" or at least parts of it; or they aimed to join "Europe" as a collectivity or polity when they had some claim to be European; or people tried – and still try – to reach Europe and settle there in the search for a better life, even risking and often losing their lives. This undeniable attractiveness of Europe has led to a high degree of complacency among Europeans, among elites as well as across society at large. It was – and often still is – widely assumed that Europeans had gotten it right, whereas others still tended to get it wrong and thus had to orient themselves towards Europe. But this is an enormous misconception of the history of Europe and of world-history. This view tends to separate Europe from other world-regions and situate it on a higher plane. Instead, the orientations of other societies and people towards Europe need to be understood as expressions of Europe's embeddedness in a global setting, in two senses: On the one hand, much of the "rise of Europe" is a consequence of past European world-domination and of injustice inflicted on others. While the era of domination is largely over, the consequences are still present and cannot be ignored. And on the other hand, there has never been a European model of modernity that has generally provided a superior mode of socio-political organisation, but a particular, contingent trajectory of historical experiences and interpretations derived from them, not separated from but closely entangled with the rest of the world. Such insight entails the need to explore the possibility that those particular circumstances may have changed for good.

A leap in European consciousness

So what is to be done? Clearly, no model or recipe is at hand. But the least one can say is that a leap in European consciousness is overdue that, in turn, is a precondion for more adequate collective action. An explosive mixture of complacency and disorientation reigns over Europe. It concerns all core aspects of the European self-understanding.

European democracy is not consolidated at all. It has lost its proclaimed, though rarely well practiced, historical nexus of nation and people and has not built any other

ground to stand on. The current fear of so-called populism is another version of the historical hesitations about democracy among European elites; and it is an indicator that no strong culture of democracy has developed in Europe during the times of formally democratic institutions. In contrast, the way to go is to overcome the notion of democracy as a mere institution and strengthen a democratic culture that is capable of self-transformation in the light of new challenges.

In economic terms, Europe did develop a sense of the embedding of markets in institutional frameworks of solidarity and democracy. But it has lost the confidence in being able to keep up such frameworks under changed circumstances and has largely abandoned them without replacement. True, sustaining such frameworks requires their competent monitoring and the continuous judgement of their adequacy. But instead of at least trying to do so, states have left the direction of economic development to the use of indicators that are manipulated at will by self-enriching business elites. It is of great urgency to restore the political capacity to frame economic action.

Among other elements, the abandoning of political capacity was also motivated by the misconceived notion of individual freedom. Not least as a consequence of historical experiences with oppression and restrictions to personal freedom, the prevailing concept of freedom has thinned out and turned increasingly individualistic. Alternative notions that see freedom thriving only in connection with democracy and solidarity do exist, but the need for them to be supported by institutions rarely finds consensus any longer.

And something similar, finally, happened to public religion. Historically, Europeans have contributed to the liberal insight that notions of revealed truth cannot be imposed. Often they have done so in a half-hearted way, keeping the majority religion in institutional connection with the state, and such arrangements have increasingly been criticized in recent years. However, rather little emphasis has been given to consider the question of religion as connected to the need for meaningful self-interpretation of the situation one finds oneself in – something that cannot be done individualistically but only by mobilizing collectively available sources of meaning.

A leap in European consciousness is a first step in a necessary re-interpretation of European modernity, based on experiences in both an earlier and the more recent past. The second step would need to be future-oriented. It would require a Europe-wide public conversation about democracy, the economy, freedom and meaning in our current time. Such conversation already takes place in many sites, in Europe and elsewhere. But it needs to acquire momentum and focus so as to allow reorientation of public affairs. The current state of Europe does not invite for much hope that this will happen soon. But without it decline becomes inevitable.

Barcelona, 19 January 2017